

Collecting, documenting and displaying the history of Qurna and the Qurnawi.

I feel honoured and extremely pleased to be here, and talking about Community Archives. *** In 1994 I was an interested foreigner spending time in Qurna trying to learn some Arabic, and was lucky to meet a number of local people, mainly men, who spoke English and were happy to chat with an inquisitive stranger about the very special place they lived. I came and went, and in the first few years, although I rented a flat in a family house when I was there, I got to know people from most of the different settlements on the hillside and so was not particularly identified with any one family area. *** My landlord was the son of a well-known traditional sheikh, *** and his wife, Fatima, was respected in all the settlements, and through her I met many women and families I would not otherwise have met. *** I always carried a camera, and a notebook, and spent hours, days and weeks over many years wandering the hillside taking photos and having fairly simple conversations with many of the families I had met. I was not a permanent resident there, still lived and worked part time in the UK, and so had easy access to the British Library and UK collections and organisations.

When I received the invitation to speak at this symposium I was rather taken aback – what had I got to do with Community Archives in the Middle East? I have helped create archive collections in the UK – but these are in the community I lived in and was part of. How could a non-local person, who didn't even speak the local language properly, and motivated largely by finding interesting things to do, have a role in creating a Qurna community archive? As I thought about it, I realised that I have been instrumental in creating various records of this community, but there was no grand plan. I was encouraged by Qurnawi friends and much helped by my habit of going back and forth from Egypt to the UK. The exhibitions were the result of suggestions from Qurnawi friends, but the photo taking and much of the historical research were purely personal interests. I guess I was lucky to be in the right place at the right time to be able to record what was happening at a crucial point in that community's history.

Exhibitions.

*** The Qurna settlements were on a hillside which has over 1000 ancient tombs,

and by 1993 there were nearly 1,500 properties and over 8,000 people. Since the 1920s the authorities had planned to relocate the people, but none of the proposals was acceptable. A huge rain storm in the desert and *** flooding from the Western hills in November 1994 *** demolished hundreds of houses and a new settlement was quickly built by the army to the north in As-Siyul. *** The authorities appointed planners from Cairo to prepare proposals for total relocation, but the locals felt disempowered. My first exhibition, 'Living villages in the city of the dead' was made as a result of hundreds of conversations with many families in Qurna, and in answer to the request, "And what can you do to help us?" Its purpose was three-fold:

1. To be a catalyst for open and informed discussion within and between families and village communities in Qurna itself: to help in the process of change.
2. To be used, if considered appropriate, in the discussions between the villagers and the authorities: to help them get the best possible deal.
3. To educate tourists, visitors and people further away about the village and its current difficulties.

In order to prove that the Qurnawi had a long history of settlement on the hillside, something that was refuted by most of the authorities and many writers and Egyptologists, I had to look for visual and written evidence. This did not exist in Qurna, but there is a wealth of written and illustrative material and maps and notebooks both printed and purely archival, in London, Paris, and other countries. *** I used a few examples of historic illustrations in the exhibition, but was also lucky that friends lent me contemporary documents which showed recent history. *** These are now probably the only extant copies of a consultation leaflet *** (for a well-meaning but totally fruitless consultation of 1994) and *** a Petition to the authorities by senior Qurnawi of 1996. Both of these are now important historic documents. The exhibition looked at relatively recent history but put it in a longer context. Working with an artist friend on a pasting table in the play room I made two copies of this exhibition, one for Qurna and one for me to take wherever. *** In 1997 we showed the Qurna copy in a number of family zawyeh and the families held meetings to discuss next moves. It gave the communities visible legitimacy, it was in Arabic and English, and easy to display even using upturned dekka instead of display panels. My copy was shown in London, Oxford and Cairo that year.

I learnt from the historical research necessary for this that there was a wealth of

information about Qurna, but none of it in Qurna or known about by Qurnawi. I did take some photocopies of various illustrations to give to friends. A Qurnawi teacher friend I told about the wonderful Robert Hay drawings asked, “Why can’t we have them?” Initially that seemed a crazy question, but I agreed to at least ask the British Library for copies of some of the best. Dr Michelle Brown, the keeper of manuscripts at the British Library, generously gave us a big box of high resolution prints of some of the collection. *** That was just the start. The ‘Living Villages’ consultation exhibition was now being stored under someone’s bed, and it was clear to me that we would have to create somewhere to view any exhibition. It would have to be a more durable and professional job, displayed in a permanent venue with a guardian, and free to view. 1999-2000 I raised the funds from friends, historical organisations and a friendly UK tour company to rent a venue and pay running costs for some years. I employed a design company in the UK to create the finished display panels. When in Qurna I worked closely with a young man from a long standing Qurna family who was employed by Finnish and German archaeologists. Abdu Daramalli and friends and family have been the local team for the last two decades.

*** In March 2001 we restored part of the Omda House (one of the finest old buildings in Qurna and once house of the Omda or Mayor). *** *** We employed elderly craftsman Taia Adoui to make us a new menama outside the Omda House - the last menama to be made in Qurna. *** Traditionally menama and such earthen structures were made in the house back yard by women, but this was one in a very public space and very few people, male or female, had the necessary skills. A set of photos showing Taia at work is now on the new website. *** On April 6th 2001 we had a grand opening *** with local dignitaries, staff from the British Library *** and good Egyptian press coverage. Qurna Discovery had both the new Robert Hay exhibition and the consultative one. *** It was open to all, 6 days a week, and became very popular with visitors and with local people.

*** Due to a problem with the landlord’s family we moved the exhibitions in 2002, *** *** and in 2004 added another small exhibition panel about local water-wheels *** – saqieh – as we had rescued one from the edge of the fields. *** The traditional water wheels were magnets for photographers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, and many of the Qurna wheels feature on antique postcards and in photo collections. *** This single display panel reproduces eleven photos of Qurna saqieh, often operated by members of known local families who now have these

photos of their ancestors.

By 2006 it was clear that most of the houses were to be demolished and we negotiated with the Minister of Culture, and the Minister of Antiquities that we could restore and preserve *** a very special group of buildings all over 100 years old and make a new permanent home for Qurna Discovery. *** We restored the buildings *** – the Daramalli family farm house, a zawyeh, a workshop and a group of fine mud structures. *** *** I made another exhibition panel about the **Zawyeh** of Qurna, *** and we opened again in November 2007. Sadly the permissions and agreements were not worth the paper they were written on, and in May 2010 the restored buildings were all bulldozed. *** Luckily we rescued the exhibitions, and I formally gave them all to Abdu who stored them in his lovely new Craft Centre in As-Siyul. *** Over the last few years we have managed to put them all up again *** and have added two more panels. One is about local traditional threshing machines, *** and the other is a previously unknown Robert Hay panorama, *** now the only copy of this on display anywhere in the world. The Balady Centre is free for anyone to visit, and open six days a week. The exhibitions are no longer on the hillside, but are safe where they are for the foreseeable future.

There is one exhibition that is not on display in Qurna – **Earth Structures of Qurna** was made for an ICOMOS conference held in Mali in 2008. *** It is in English and French rather than Arabic. One copy was given to the Bamako Museum, and I have a second copy which has been to various UK venues. It can be seen on the old Qurna website.

Collecting

My grandparents owned cameras and I have photos of my grandparents and great grandparents. This is not unusual in many countries and in middle class families. It is hard to appreciate just how revolutionary a camera is to the creation of personal and community archives, and not just the camera itself but the means to print the pictures. *** The most usual photo to see on a wall in a Qurna house was a portrait of whichever local Sheikh the family followed. Many families had a photo of a family wedding taken in the local photographer's studio. Some had an old photo of a

male member in army uniform. A few families had long-standing friendships with frequent visitors and had collections of photos taken by their foreign friends, but most families on the hillside had no such collections to record new babies and growing children, or special events.

When friends and acquaintances realised that I was someone who regularly visited, they asked me to take photos of the family. *** The woman who kept the small shop round the corner asked me to take a photo of her new grandchildren. I would bring the prints back next time I visited. Some families of friends have prints recording the last 24 years – children now have grandchildren and some grandparents have died. *** After Hajj Mahmoud died his wife, Hera, asked if I could bring two large prints of him with the family that she could have in her room. A young man in his early 20s I met again last year showed me that he has a photo of himself as a toddler on his mobile *** – it is the first photo that was taken of him – by me. I feel very grateful to have been able to give this sort of pleasure to friends and families while basically enjoying myself.

I have many hundreds of photos of houses, and when enforced resettlement was obviously going to happen I printed and laminated dozens of A4 and A3 prints of people's houses. *** Abdu and I walked the hillside giving copies to residents so that they would at least have one photo of their old house to put on the wall in their new house if they wished. I collected old postcards and photos in Cairo and London and also took these images back. *** The coffee shop near where Bir Taia once stood now has a large print of it in the 1920's on the wall. I bought this lovely photo in a Sunday post-card fair in London, and was lucky to spot it and recognise the site. Probably the earliest photo of a named Upper Egyptian woman *** is in an obscure book on Coptic manuscripts I was thumbing through in a second-hand shop in London, but copies of this remarkable photo of Fendia, taken in about 1907, are now held by many of her Qurnawi descendants. Photos taken by foreigners to show 'typical native scenes' are often of people who can still be identified and their portraits returned to their families – sometimes the only image of that man or woman. *** On March 18th 2001 I invited descendants of the large extended family of Sheikh Awad (c.1773-1868) to meet the English great grand-daughter of Joseph Bonomi (1796-1878) who had drawn his portrait in about 1828. I made a little temporary exhibition, there was lots of cake and everyone was given a certificate with portraits of the two men who had been close friends in Qurna 180 years before.

Recording

In the past 20 years I have given many talks and written various articles about Qurna history. *** The first website I made has copies and links to many of these and some copies of old photos. That website was designed primarily for non-Qurnawi – to encourage people to visit **Qurna Discovery** and also donate to its upkeep. It is only in English. I will try to continue to put my various papers and articles on this site so that the results of the research do not get lost. My most recent work has been to put together all the oral, written and visual records of the first mosque, which may have even been Fatimid! Like most buildings in Qurna it was destroyed before being properly recorded as a structure – but I must make sure that these other records also don't just disappear.

After the demolition of almost all the houses and buildings on the hillside I realised that the photos I had taken years before purely for personal interest and stored in files in my study in London, now should have a wider audience. The resettled Qurnawi should be able to see their old homes and wander the hillside again. *** ??? The second website, 'Qurna in the sky', has over 800 photos taken by me and many postcard and early 20th century images taken by others. It is in Arabic and English, and you can search the various settlements via a satellite image of the hillside. Two local friends identified the owners of the houses, so people can find their father's or uncle's home by searching his name in Arabic or English. This website is primarily for Qurnawi rather than foreign visitors, although it is important that everyone can see the beauty and details of what was destroyed. It took me many years to get this website sorted and up and running, but the images are now available for all to see. Many Qurnawi now have access to computers and fancy mobiles so that they can see it all if they wish on the internet.

You used to be able to sit on the roof of Said Galag's bar and restaurant and see the houses on Dra abu'l Naga opposite – now they are gone, but a long panorama print of the scene in the late 1990s is now on the wall of the restaurant.

A visual record was one thing but an oral record was quite another and my very limited Arabic made this impossible for me. Over the years I had learnt clues of

many beliefs and practices, especially those of women, which were unrecorded. ***
For instance, how many women (and perhaps some men) had magic stones from the hillside and what did they really mean to those who treasured them and lent them to sick and infertile women? It was very clear to me that there was a gap in the record, and that was the traditional life of families on the hillside recorded by the women and men in their own words. Since 2006 I had been appealing for some institution to do this work before it was too late and while the elderly still had clear memories. Despite a superb book *** by Kees Van der Spek (AUC Press 2011) and a number of other articles about the Qurnawi, this work was still necessary. In 2014 a friend working at the American University in Cairo put me in touch with Stephen Urgola, Archivist and Keeper of the Rare Books Collection at AUC. After two years of planning, *** a group of 6 post-graduate students came down to Qurna in April 2016 and worked with Abdu and other Qurna contacts *** and 75 interviews were conducted, a third of them with women. These interviews are being transcribed and eventually all will be on the AUC Rare Books website. I am hoping that at least some of these interviews will tell us things we don't already know, and that they will fill in the gaps of half told stories, that they will introduce us to some interesting people and that they will shed some light on the relationship between the hillside and the people who lived there. For me to know what the women and men have said I need to have them translated into English. That will cost money, and so I end with a plea. If you know anyone who can help or sponsor these translations please do get in touch with me.

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